

Empowering Youth in Drug Prevention Education Programmes through Motivational Camp Retreat

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Abstract

Drug-related problems have always been a major plight among youths. Effective approaches are therefore essential to counter the problem of illicit drug use. This paper focuses on the promotion of a camp retreat as a drug prevention education programme for school children. The camp, facilitated by trained teachers and peer facilitators, incorporated physical and spiritual team-building activities, effective communication, life and refusal skill trainings. High-risk students were informed on the dangers of drug use, about religious and social perception on substances of abuse, negative influence of social media in the form of info-games, role-play, problem-solving, group exercises and discussions. At the end of the programme, participants evaluated the effectiveness, appropriateness and lessons learned from the camp's activities. The outcomes strongly indicate that youths are more receptive to this approach of learning, information sharing and character building programmes.

Keywords: *drug-related problems, youth, camp retreat, drug prevention educational programme*

Introduction

Developing tobacco and drug prevention educational programmes is a challenge faced by many communities and countries in the world today (Fagorala, 2013; Thomas, McLellan, & Perera, 2013; Jain et al., 2014). Various policies, regulations and legislations have been gazetted and implemented but due to varying differences in culture, beliefs and economic status, the effects of these measures rarely achieve the desired results (Evans-Whipp et al., 2002). Tobacco and drug prevention efforts require strategic coordination, resources and enormous political commitment to deal with it. Tobacco, inhalants and other substances of abuse create chains of problems socially, physically and mentally. As far as any cessation programme is concerned, there has been little or no clear evidence of what comprises the “best practices” to curb children

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and teenagers from getting involved in these bad habits. The challenge, therefore, is to come out with an effective and sustainable intervention programme to address the problem.

Although several series of health educational and intervention programmes have existed, they appear to have little impact on the target population (Jones, Fisher, Greene, Hertz, & Pritzl, 2007; Morgan, White, & Mun, 2002). These interventions include policies, law and regulations, community and school-based health education and health promotion programmes. There are already existing rules and regulations implemented in schools to penalise students found in possession of substances of abuse such as tobacco, inhalants and drugs (His Majesty's Government Gazette, 2004). However, as often the case, prosecuting a few offending students does not seem to discourage other students from being involved in smoking or drug-taking. The initiation stage of these behaviours may seem rather complex particularly when product advertisement, easy access to certain substances (tobacco and inhalants), role modelling and peer influence are factored in. Therefore, an appropriate programme is required to address some of these factors which include peer influence, capacity building, communication skills, self-confidence and self-awareness towards knowledge and information on substance of abuse.

Literature Review

Many studies have suggested that school-based programme can be an effective means of preventing tobacco use among youth (National Cancer Institute, 1990; Glynn, 1989; Walter, Vaughn, & Wynder, 1989). However, some of these efforts could have ended with mixed results (Lantz et al., 2000). According to numerous independent studies, school-based tobacco and drug prevention education programmes that focus on skills training approaches have proved effective in reducing the onset of smoking. Given the diversity of cultures represented in the community, it is important to tailor prevention education programmes for particular ethnic/racial sub-population. Hence, programmes should be sensitive to, and representative of, a population that is multicultural, multi-ethnic, and socio-economically diverse. School-based programmes to prevent tobacco use can also contribute to the prevention of use of illicit drugs especially if such programmes are also designed to prevent the use of these substances (Errecart et al., 1991).

Some community-based prevention educational programmes reportedly are able to provide positive impact on decreasing drug use in high-risk adolescents (Chou et al., 1998). Therefore, training modules for the target population need to be developed which primarily provide the teenagers knowledge about substance of abuse, health, economic and social impacts of these substances. Its primary objective is to provide adequate understanding and information of the issues. At the same time, it also provides additional aids for those who wish to quit.

Perhaps since tobacco and drug issues are perceived in different manners by teenagers, organised programmes and activities should therefore be tailored to suit their interest and liking while incorporating all the educational components in them (Coleman & Cater, 2006). High-risk adolescents may require a different approach (Mackenzie, Hunt, & Joe-Laidler, 2005; Slesnicka & Prestopnikb, 2005)). Therefore this programme was designed as an alternative method to develop personal skills of the teenagers to fight against substance of abuse and to raise their awareness and self-resilience against it.

Methodology

Forty students (age 13–15 years) from two secondary schools were selected based on recommendation and consent of the school authorities. The students were from “high-risk” group identified as having been socially involved with smoking. Some, among them, have

experienced inhalants and drugs. Demographic and socioeconomic data were gathered. The students' knowledge and attitudes towards smoking and substance of abuse were determined.

Various sessions of talks, group counselling, workshop and motivational camp were carried out with the group. At the motivational camp, the students participated in a number of activities aimed at strengthening their knowledge, awareness and rejection ability towards substance of abuse. Various topics on substance abuse were discussed with officers from the National Anti-Drug Agency, teachers and trained facilitators. These included:

- a) The acute and long-term effects of substances of abuse on the health.
- b) Why people smoke and use drugs and why they find it difficult to quit.
- c) Recognising misleading information about smoking and substances of abuse.
- d) Understanding that prevention and cessation of smoking and substances of abuse are both medically and cost effective.
- e) Social and religious components and why the use of these substances are detrimental to the community.

The information were shared and disseminated throughout the session called *World Café*, adopted from a component of the "Visualisation in Participatory Programme" (ViPP) training programme. It is designed to encourage active participation of all team members. The camp also included team-building activities in the form of jungle-trekking, survival lunch, games and community outreach. The objectives of these activities are to create self-confidence, promote cooperation and friendship among the team members, and empowering them to make responsible and correct decisions.

At the conclusion of the programme, participants were asked to evaluate the appropriateness and the effectiveness of the programme.

Results

Preliminary data shows that the most closely associated variables to substance abuse appear to be the lack of good self-motivation and negative peer group influence. The majority of the students who refrained from indulging in this habit knew the hazardous effects of these substances.

The motivational camp retreat was organised to help students quit or stay away from substances of abuse using a number of training modules. In most instances, smoking and substance of abuse were associated with social desirability and acceptability, sophistication, adulthood, personal appearance and the feeling of independence. In addressing these issues, the training modules in the motivational camp were designed to provide knowledge about substances of abuse, its health and social aspects, and ways to quit and abstain from smoking and drug taking.

Thirty-six out of the 40 identified students participated in the motivational camp. Evaluation of the camp's activities was required of them at the conclusion of the camp. The findings indicated the programme was well received by the students and the camp objectives had been met.

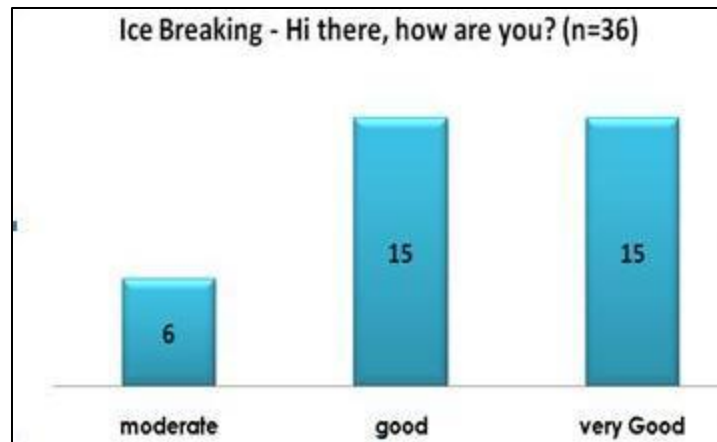


Figure 1: Ice-Breaking Activity

In the jungle trekking activity, participants spent about three hours in the jungle with trained guides learning basic jungle surviving techniques.

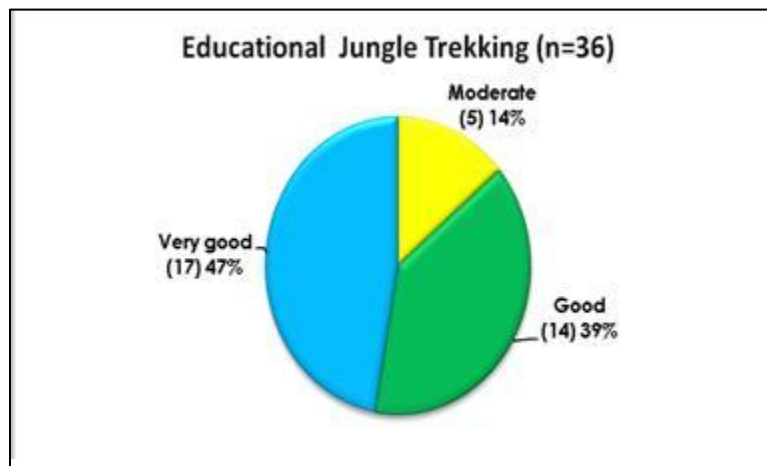


Figure 2: Educational Jungle Trekking

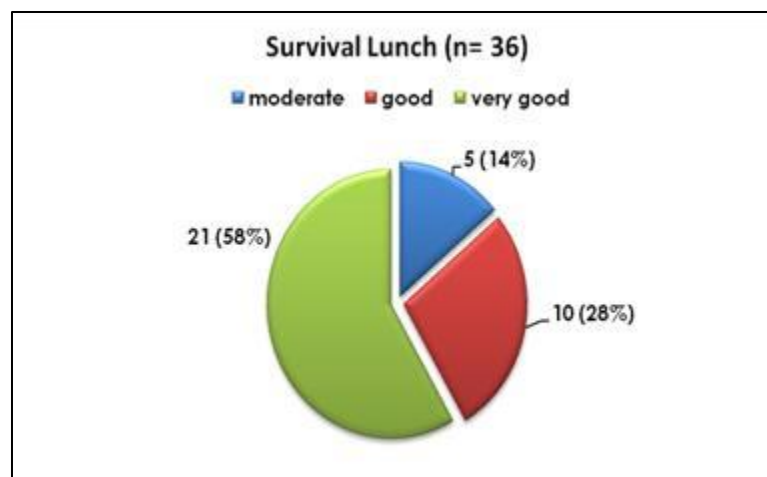


Figure 3: Participants' rating of the "Survival Lunch" activity

In this activity, participants were required to cook a meal with limited cooking material and resources provided by the trainers.

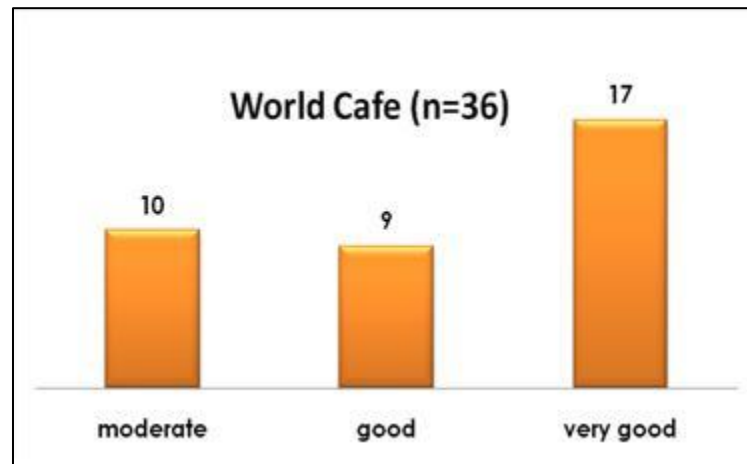


Figure 4: Sharing and dissemination of information from activities of World Café

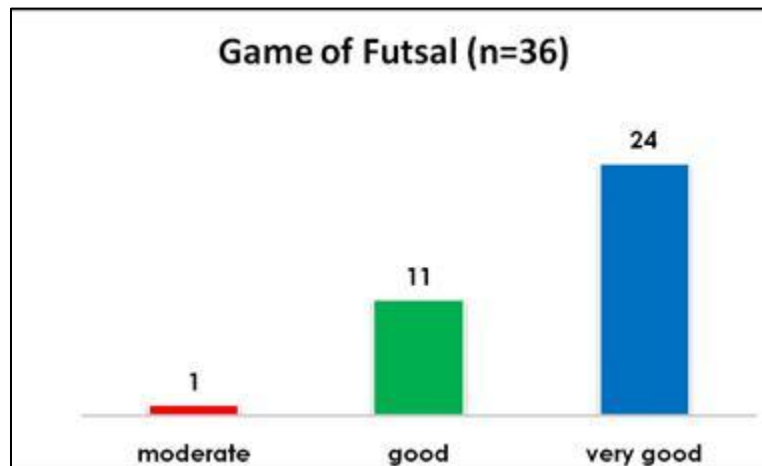


Figure 5: Participants' approval rating for the futsal game activity

For community work, participants were required to clean various designated areas including rubbish collection and all other un-degradable items for proper disposal (Figure 6). The community provided the tools required for this activity.

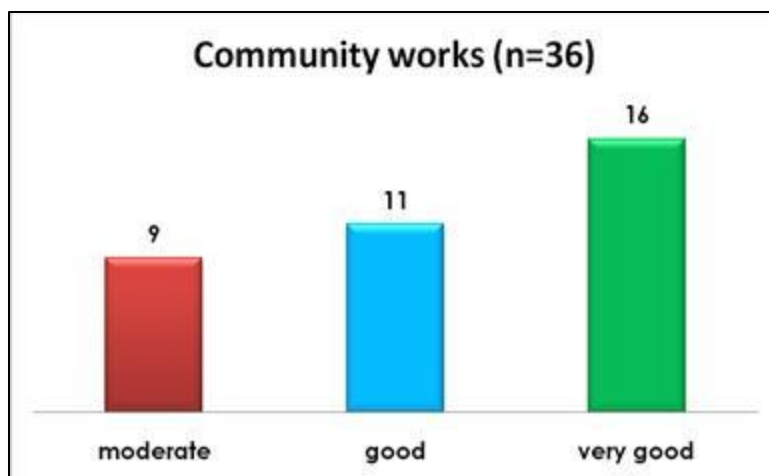


Figure 6: Community work

The location of the camp was on a small island, *Pulau Aman* (Peace Island) situated about 5km from the mainland of Penang. Common camping facilities are available in this small fishing village.



Figure 7: Location of motivational camp

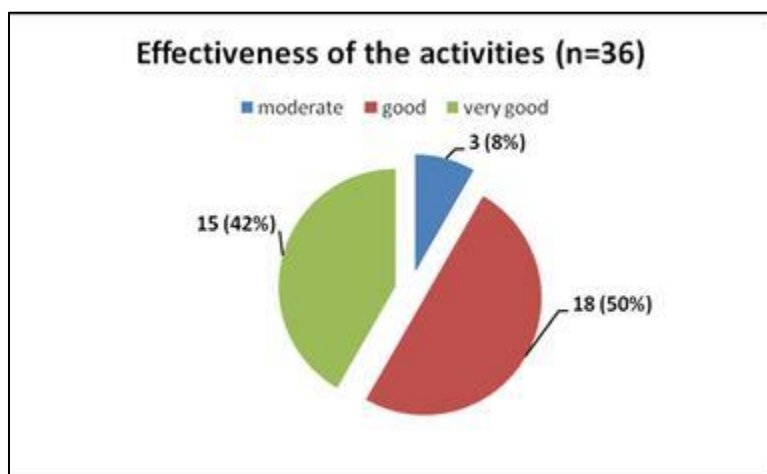


Figure 8: Effectiveness of the activities

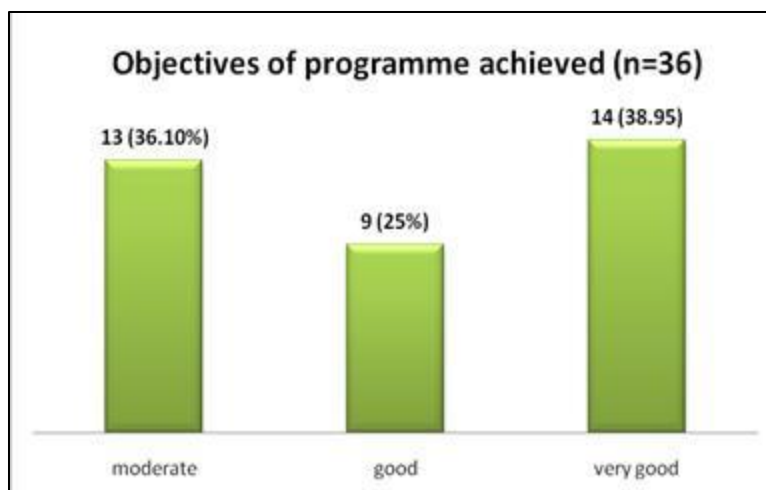


Figure 9: Objectives of programme achieved

Discussion

The main objective of this motivational camp is to provide an alternative way to impart knowledge to the target group with active involvement of the participants in various interactive modules and outdoor activities. The programme also involved the participation of various governmental and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and the community. It also aims to heighten the ability and awareness of the students to quit or refrain from the bad habits. Additionally, it serves as a starting point to establish the involvement of youths in drugs prevention and tobacco control efforts. The camp was able to provide the students with knowledge, communication skill (rejection and assertiveness) and awareness on various social influences related to use of substances of abuse (Razak, Rahmat, Abd. Harris, Yusoff, & Lim, 2004).

The main challenge of this programme was to ensure that the students remained focused and maintained their interest in the programme. Although the initial findings showed that the programme was well-received and has achieved its objectives, it also had to be sustainable and able to generate adequate interest for the students to be associated with it long term. Multi-prong approaches are therefore employed. Tohid et. al. (2012) rightly pointed out that as far as smoking is concerned, it should include strategies beyond educating teenagers about smoking and restricting their access to cigarettes. Strategies to manage the cunning behaviour of teenagers and strategies to improve their self-efficacy should also be implemented (Tohid et al., 2012). Other drug prevention programmes should also follow the same course.

The relevant authorities should also emphasise more on capacity building and training of human resources when dealing with drug prevention and tobacco control programme. In order to create a conducive environment for this programme to be effective, various quarters in the community should also play their respective positive roles, particularly the community leaders such as religious leaders, teachers and parents. They should portray good behaviour and act as role models to the younger generation.

Summary

Structured and coordinated tobacco and drug prevention educational programmes could be one of the most effective strategies to reduce the burden of physical, emotional, and monetary expense incurred by substances of abuse.

To achieve optimum effectiveness, programmes on preventing substance abuse should be carefully planned and implemented systematically. Well-designed school and community programmes could effectively reduce teenage involvement with substances of abuse if schools and community leaders are committed in implementing and ensuring sustainability of these programmes. The programmes should embrace broader social environment that includes the general community, parents and relevant organisations outside the school compound.

Development of effective tobacco (drugs) prevention and control practices requires concerted effort from all quarters since there is no single practice that can be introduced as the best practice ever. Any comprehensive measure must be specific, especially when dealing with a special group(s) of population such as the young people and adolescents.

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